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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended for school leaders acting to involve families in the education of their children. A common concern is the amount and kinds of family involvement that lead to a positive school climate and higher student achievement. To address this concern, strategies are outlined to help school leaders in deciding upon the kinds of family involvement that are appropriate for the school. Sample survey instruments are included to involve both principals and families in the decision-making process, along with information about building on survey results in developing a strong family-school partnership. Further information about printed and face-to-face communication methods are presented, including parent conferences. Test scores and helping with homework are topics given emphasis. Steps are considered that school leaders can take to create an overall school climate that lets families know they are welcome and appreciated. Appendix A contains letters and forms in both English and Spanish for conducting sample surveys. Appendix B contains reproducible materials for presentations. (Contains 68 references.) (RT)

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Essentials for Principals

Strengthening the Connection between School and Home

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Essentials for Principals™

Strengthening the Connection between School and Home

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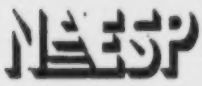

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Foreword

The success of a school and its principal depends in large part on the satisfaction of parents and their feelings of empowerment in the education of their children. In addition, when schools and families work in partnership, students benefit. Because the principal plays a key role in promoting such a partnership, the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Educational Research Service chose family involvement as the fourth topic in the *Essentials for Principals* series.

NAESP created the *Essentials for Principals* series to provide information that is both practical and solidly research-based on issues of vital importance to school leaders. Each publication in the series is jointly developed and prepared by NAESP and ERS to present research and practical experience in a down-to-earth discussion of what every school leader should know about the topic. Like the previous volumes, this fourth publication in the series—*Strengthening the Connection between School and Home*—is a valuable resource for both beginning and experienced principals.

In addition to the checklists and sample surveys throughout the publication, this *Essentials* guide includes two appendices, which contain 1) sample materials such as beginning-of-the-year letters, phone call formats, and newsletter formats; and 2) reproducible materials that can be copied and distributed to teachers and parents, such as tips on making the most of conferences and suggestions for helping with homework.

NAESP and ERS believe that this *Essentials* guide will help principals provide the best leadership possible to create a school climate in which families, staff, and students work together to promote high levels of student learning. We welcome your comments and suggestions about this publication, as well as ways in which the *Essentials for Principals* series can be most helpful to you.

Vincent L. Ferrandino
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About this *Essentials for Principals* Publication

This *Essentials* guide deals with a subject that is high on the agenda of every school leader: involving families in the education of their children. Few would question the importance of productive family involvement. Its benefits for students, parents, teachers, and schools are well documented.

But even as we acknowledge that family involvement is generally a good thing, we must also recognize the question inherent in family involvement efforts: What amounts and what kinds of family involvement lead to a positive school climate and higher student achievement? The purpose of this *Essentials for Principals* guide is to help you, as the school leader, address these questions and use the answers to design an effective, productive family involvement program that meets the needs of your school.

In the following chapter, we outline strategies you can use to decide what kinds of family involvement are right for your specific school. Because it is vital that parents and teachers be involved in this process, sample survey instruments for both groups are included. Also included is information about building on the survey results to develop a realistic plan for building a strong family-school partnership, as well as a discussion of how to tell whether your efforts are making a difference.

Communication is key to successful family involvement efforts. How many problems and headaches of the principal's life could be avoided with effective and clear communication? This *Essentials* guide includes detailed information about both print and face-to-face communication methods, including parent conferences. Two hot topics that parents want information about—test scores and helping with homework—are highlighted.

Finally, we consider steps school leaders can take to create an overall school climate that lets families know they are welcome and appreciated. Personal relationships with teachers and other school staff are the foundation of such a climate.

As in all publications in the *Essentials for Principals* series, this guide is intended to be used as a practical reference on a continuing basis, rather than read once and put on a shelf. It includes many useful samples, checklists, and handouts that you can use as they are or adapt to your school's specific parent involvement efforts. Space is provided at the end of each chapter for you to jot down notes, reminders, and ideas.

We are sure that you will find this *Essentials* guide a useful tool for you and your staff as you strive to improve the effectiveness of family involvement in your school.

Note to the reader: In this publication we have used the terms "parent involvement" and "family involvement" interchangeably. We are aware that for many children, extended family members and other caring adults fulfill the parental role. Children need many people to be active in their lives and concerned about their future. The use of the term "parent" or "family" is not meant to exclude or marginalize other adults who actively support a child's education. The goal of the involvement effort is to strengthen the connection between the school and the adults who care for the children who attend that school. It is important, however, to remember that certain kinds of participation are limited to parents or others with legal responsibility for a child.

Family Involvement: A Vital Component of Student Success

Benefits of Family Involvement

According to the most recent *Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude toward the Public Schools,* both parents of school-age children and other members of the public see education as a major national issue, and believe that parent involvement is a major factor in improving public schools (Rose and Gallup 2001).

Yet educators are bemoaning the fact that they are having a harder time then ever engaging parents to be actively involved. School administrators are hard-pressed to create options that enable most families to play an active and effective role in supporting their children's schooling. And, at a time when schools are being held accountable as never before, they need the help and support of parents more than ever.

If you've taken the time from your busy day to read this publication, it's clear that you already know that parental involvement is a vital component of student success in school. You understand that families are both essential in shaping the development and attitudes of children and a valuable resource to the entire school community.

You've read and heard about the research that indicates that when families are involved in their children's education, children achieve higher grades, have better attendance, complete more homework, are better motivated, and are less likely to have behavioral problems.

An extensive research base developed over many years has made it clear that meaningful family involvement is a powerful predictor of student success in school (Davies 1993). For example, Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla, after a comprehensive review of the literature on family involvement, concluded that "the research has

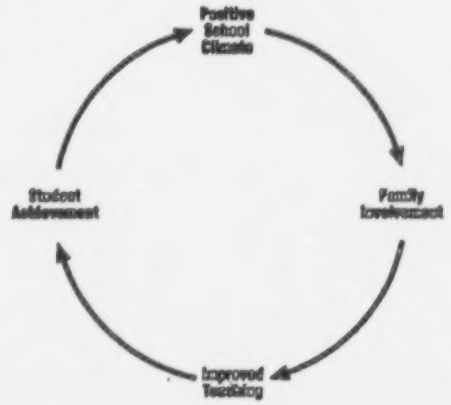
become overwhelmingly clear; parent involvement—and that means all kinds of parents—improves student achievement." Specifically, they say:

- Educators hold higher expectations of students whose parents collaborate with the teacher.
- In programs that are designed to involve parents in full partnerships, disadvantaged students' achievement not only improves, but can reach levels that are standard for middle-class children.
- Schools that work well with families have higher teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents.
- A school's practices in informing and involving parents are stronger determinants of whether inner-city parents will be involved with their children's education than are parent education, family size, marital status, and student grade level (Pape 1998, 19).

When families are actively involved in schools, teachers learn more about the students in their class and are better able to provide appropriate educational services for their students. Ultimately, students become more ready and able to learn—and

Family Involvement is an Integral Part of the Picture

The circular, reciprocal relationship between school climate, family involvement, and student achievement is illustrated in the figure below.



Source: *Critical Issue: Creating the School Climate and Structures to Support Parent and Family Involvement*, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1996.

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Benefits of Strong Home-School Partnerships

Teachers benefit through:

- Better understanding of parent expectations and closer communication with parents
- Increased rate of return on homework and greater family involvement in home learning activities
- Increased parental support and cooperation

Administrators benefit through:

- Better communication between school and home
- Fewer parent complaints about inconsistent and inappropriate homework
- Better use of limited resources to link home and school
- Improved school climate when children see parents and teachers as working partners

Parents benefit through:

- Opportunity to become partners with teachers and to shape important decisions that enhance their children's success
- Consistent expectations, practices, and messages about homework and home-learning activities
- Increased opportunities to engage in home-learning activities with children
- Access to schoolwide resources such as parent learning centers, homework hotlines, homework centers, parent workshops, and home visits

Students benefit through:

- More positive attitudes toward school
- Higher achievement in reading
- Better and more grade-appropriate homework assignments
- Completion of more homework assignments because of greater parental interest and support
- Greater consistency between family and school goals

Sources: "Effects on Student Achievement of Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement," J.L. Epstein, 1991; "School and Family Partnerships," J.L. Epstein, 1992; *The Evidence Continues to Grow*, A.T. Henderson, 1987; *At-Risk Families and Schools: Becoming Partners*, L.B. Liontos, 1992; and *Building School-Family Partnerships for Learning*, O.C. Moles and D. D'Angelo, 1993.

more likely to stay in school and benefit from high-quality learning experiences. These positive outcomes happen regardless of ethnic/racial background, social economic status, or the parents' educational level (Henderson 1987; Henderson and Berla 1995).

Involved families also become advocates for the school with the general public. And because families who have children in school are vastly outnumbered by those who don't, a legion of informed, motivated parents can do wonders when it's time to vote for a bond issue (Warner 1997).

Challenges of Family Involvement

At the same time that you recognize the benefits of family involvement in education, you also know that school-home relationships can be fraught with tensions and challenges. You've experienced the community meeting that only a handful of parents attended; you've received the phone call from the angry parent demanding that something be done immediately about a difficult situation; and you've listened to teachers report that "there just isn't any time to work with parents."

While teachers and parents share a desire to educate children, they do not necessarily agree on how best to accomplish that goal. A recent survey by the National Opinion Research Center (1997) revealed that most parents believe that schools see them as important partners but need to learn ways to involve them more effectively. And parents at all economic strata report that increased work demands and stress too often make it difficult to be involved in their children's education.

Parents may be "hard to reach" because they are non-English speaking or economically disadvantaged, and these factors create language or cultural barriers between the parent and the school. And families lacking childcare or caring for elderly relatives may be equally hard to involve as active participants in the school. But increasingly, given long working hours and fast-track careers, many professional, middle-class parents could also be described this way.

The growing number and variety of students' ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds make reaching out to families increasingly complex. School staff who think only in terms of traditional families are likely to have a particularly hard time dealing with today's great variety of family types. Educators must face up to their own assumptions about families and be prepared to understand the life situations of families who are not heavily involved in the school. The San Diego City Schools (1991) identified common assumptions often held by educators that tend to either limit or support home-school collaboration. These are shown in the box on the following page. How many of these assumptions do you and your staff hold?

Educators' Assumptions that Hinder or Facilitate Home-School Collaboration

Assumptions that Hinder Collaboration	Assumptions that Facilitate Collaboration
Parents who don't attend school events don't care about their children's success in school.	Not all parents can come to school or feel comfortable about it; that doesn't mean they don't care.
Parents who are illiterate, non-English speaking, or unemployed can't help their children with school.	All families have strengths and skills they can contribute to their children's school success.
Parents from different ethnic and racial groups don't understand how to help their children with school.	Parents from different ethnic and racial groups may have alternative and important ways of supporting their children.
It's up to parents to find out what is going on at school.	Schools have a responsibility to reach out to all parents.
Parent involvement is not worth educators' effort.	Parent involvement pays off in improved student achievement, improved school effectiveness, and increased parent and community satisfaction.

Source: San Diego City Schools, 1991.

As the school leader, you might ask your staff to identify families they consider hard to reach. Then, have them determine whether they have any of these assumptions about these families. If they do, you'll need to work with your staff to change these assumptions.

As a subset of this work, you'll want to get your staff thinking about why parents do or do not become involved and what they—as educators—can do both personally and professionally to build more productive involvement. Ask them to focus on the hard-to-reach families they've identified, but recognize that their answers will have payoff across the board for getting *all* parents involved.

Research has suggested that parents' decisions about becoming actively involved depend on several factors:

- **Personal perception of their role in education.** What do the parents view as necessary and permissible to do? When parents believe they should be involved in their child's education, they are more likely to do so. But some ethnic groups tend to see instilling proper behavior and respect as the task of

families, and instilling knowledge as the task of schools. For this reason, it is vital to stress the important role parents can play in influencing their children's learning. Stress that the school expects families to teach basic skills and reinforce classroom learning.

- **Parents' work schedule.** How flexible are the parents' work schedules? Some parents would like to assist at the school, but find that work often interferes. Your staff needs to be sensitive about constraints on parental involvement and work with parents to develop alternatives.

  One easy way to do this is to be flexible about scheduling conferences and meetings. Another is to tailor what you ask them to do in support of the school to their jobs and work schedules. For example, parents working nights or the "swing shift" can't be expected to monitor homework very well (White-Clark and Decker undated; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Nicolau and Ramos 1990).

- **Sense of efficacy.** Do parents view themselves as able to help their children do better in school? Parents who have done poorly in school may feel that they have little to offer their children and may be self-conscious about revealing their own academic difficulties.

  A common phenomenon these days are language-minority parent who may feel ineffectual because they cannot read English-language textbooks very well. Another is the case of parents who did not do well in school themselves or who did not graduate. These parents may suffer from low self-esteem and thus find it hard to believe that there is anything they could do to help their children succeed in school.

  These are very touchy situations that call for great sensitivity. One strategy is for your staff to de-emphasize the skill or knowledge aspects of these parents' involvement. Instead, focus on how they can contribute to their children's positive attitudes toward school. Share with these parents the importance of having high expectations for their children and communicating the value of school to them. You also may want to provide concrete, explicit examples of ways they can support their children's learning. And where possible, make literacy activities and/or GED classes available to those who want them.

- **Parental feelings of "welcomeness."** Do the parents feel that the school (and their children) invite and want their involvement? When parents know they are genuinely welcome at the school, they are more likely to participate. Provide a variety of options for participation, and let parents choose. Learn as much as possible from families about their cultural experiences, values, and attitudes. Spend time creating a school environment that reflects the community from which the students come. Consider personally inviting

parents. Parents who receive a personal note from the principal or a teacher inviting their participation are more likely to accept the invitation.

Role of the School Leader

It cannot be stressed enough that strong support for making the family-school partnership a priority needs to come from the school leader. When administrators make it clear that family involvement is important, teachers are more likely to use family involvement strategies.

Schoolwide Leadership Needed for Successful Family Involvement

Above all, schools, under the leadership of principals, possess the primary responsibility for initiating school-family partnerships. Schools can invest heavily in professional development that supports family involvement, create time for staff to work with parents, supply necessary resources, design innovative strategies to meet the needs of diverse families, and provide useful information to families on how they can contribute to their children's learning (Funkhouser and Gonzales 1997).

It would be hard to find a principal who does not speak positively of the relationship between family involvement and school improvement. But talking about the importance of working closely with families does not always translate into implementation, commitment, and resource allocation.

Moreover, for family involvement efforts to be successful, they must be made a school priority. Improving the level of family involvement in your school will require a change in how resources are apportioned, how your time is spent, and how priorities are communicated to teachers and staff. Dollars and time will be needed to secure staff and parental input and buy-in.

Transforming the school into an institution that treats families as partners in the students' education will take time, and the effort will not always go smoothly. Unintended consequences are bound to occur, including personality conflicts between parents and groups who do not fully understand legal and district restrictions. The principal who leads family involvement efforts in the school will need to monitor and nurture the effort continuously.

While family involvement is crucial, it is not easy to achieve. The key ingredient of success is commitment. Before reading on, take a few moments to reflect on whether now is the time to sharpen your focus on family involvement. Do you have sufficient commitment to begin each workday looking for creative ways to invite and engage family members as partners in the educational enterprise?

If so, read on. Your efforts will be worthwhile, because they have the potential to pay off in improved educational opportunities for students and enhanced pride in the school and community.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas:

Creating a Solid Plan to Improve Family Involvement

Undoubtedly, you and your staff on an individual basis already engage in some activities that are designed to facilitate families' participation in the school. But, as you consider the benefits of effective family-school partnerships, you may decide that you want to find ways to promote greater and more productive family involvement through a schoolwide effort.

Before undertaking new efforts to boost the participation of families in the life and activities of your school, it is important to assess where you are now and where you want to go. In this chapter, we address the following questions that you should consider in order to create a solid plan to improve family involvement:

- What is the current status of family involvement in our school?
- How do we want to improve our family-school partnership?
- What challenges will we have to overcome to get from where we are to where we want to go?
- Do we have the commitment to accomplish our goal of increasing family involvement?
- What will we see if we accomplish our goal?

Finding Out Where You Are

Joyce Epstein and others (1997) have developed a framework that provides a broad vision of what family involvement can be. For each component of the framework, there are responsibilities for home and school. Briefly, the six types of involvement are:

1. **Parenting:** Fulfilling basic parental responsibilities for a child's health and social development at home.

   Family Responsibilities—Families need to fulfill certain basic responsibilities for a child's education and social development. They should make sure

children arrive at school well rested, appropriately clothed, and well fed. The home environment should encourage learning and good behavior.

School Responsibilities—The school should provide information to help parents understand child development and create home environments that encourage learning and respectful behavior.

2. **Communicating:** Ensuring that appropriate mechanisms for school-to-home and home-to-school communication exist.

   Family Responsibilities—Families need to share relevant information about home situations that have an impact on learning. Parents need to participate in school conferences and meetings and ask for clarification of any information that seems unclear.

   School Responsibilities—Families need basic information about what their children are learning and what expectations the school has for its students, so that they can help students complete class assignments, budget their time, and select courses. The school should use multiple communication strategies to inform families of school programs and student progress. Information should be presented in forms that families find useful and understandable.

3. **Volunteering:** Recruiting and organizing parent help and support.

   Family Responsibilities—Every parent should try to volunteer at least once each school year. This could be as a classroom aide, student tutor, resource gatherer for special projects, or a member of the audience for school programs and sporting events.

   School Responsibilities—Families need to have firsthand knowledge of who their child's teacher is and a sense of the school. The school should offer a variety of volunteer opportunities at various times to accommodate employed parents. Parents with younger children may need childcare. Every effort should be made to acknowledge and thank parents when they volunteer.

4. **Learning at home:** Creating a home environment that supports learning and values education.

   Family Responsibilities—Families should supervise and assist with homework assignments and other school-related activities. "Teaching" should be the job of the teacher, but parents can significantly contribute when they encourage, praise, guide, and discuss schoolwork with their children.

   School Responsibilities—Schools should provide information about the skills needed to pass from one grade to another and strategies to monitor, discuss, and help with homework.

5. **Decision making:** Serving as an advisor or decision maker on an advisory committee or board with responsibility for advising school leaders or helping with school governance.

   Family Responsibilities—Parents should seek out opportunities to participate in school advisory councils, school site improvement teams, and other school committees. They should view their role as joint decision makers and problem solvers rather than monitors or merely deferring to school personnel.

   School Responsibilities—The school should develop opportunities for parents to acquire needed leadership and decision-making skills and encourage parents to join organizations.

6. **Collaboration with the community:** Working with community resources to strengthen family practices and school programs.

   Family Responsibilities—Although the education of a community's young people is a shared responsibility, families should be willing to work with schools as they establish links with cultural groups, agencies, businesses, and organizations committed to the future success of youth. Families should initiate these links whenever feasible.

   School Responsibilities—The school should reach out for families' help in establishing links to community agencies. Schools also could promote access to community services for families that need them—for example, tutorial, health, recreational, and social support, and mental health services.

The Epstein model has been adopted by the National PTA (1998), which has developed a set of quality indicators for each component. The checklist on pages 14-17, based on these indicators, gives you a tool to help you assess the nature and level of your school's current efforts to involve parents. You can also use the checklist to identify ideas about areas that might need more attention or might need to be redirected.

Deciding Where You Want to Go

As the previous section illustrates, there are many ways parents can be involved. It is important to determine the ways in which increased family involvement can best serve your school and its families and students. Depending on the particular school community, the activities and strategies employed to achieve each of the types of parent involvement will differ.

Comprehensive family involvement programs include activities from each of the areas listed above. Not every school can afford (or even wants) to have a comprehensive program, but most schools could (and want to) enhance their parent involvement

Quality Indicators for Family Involvement					
COMPONENT	Always Done	Frequently Done	Rarely Done	Not Done	Something to Try
Parenting					
◆ Communicate the importance of positive relationships between parents and their children.					
◆ Link parents to programs and resources within the community that provide health, welfare, or other support services to families.					
◆ Reach out to all families, not just those who attend parent meetings.					
◆ Establish policies that support and respect family responsibilities, recognizing the variety of parenting traditions and practices within the community's cultural and religious diversity.					
◆ Provide an accessible parent/family information and resource center in the school to support parents and families with training, resources, and other services.					
◆ Encourage staff members to demonstrate respect for families and for the family's primary role in the rearing of children to become responsible adults.					
Communicating					
◆ Use a variety of communication tools on a regular basis, seeking to facilitate two-way interaction through each type of medium.					
◆ Establish opportunities for parents and educators to share "partnering" information such as student strengths and learning preferences.					
◆ Provide clear information regarding course expectations and offerings, student placement, school activities, student services, and optional programs.					
◆ Mail report cards and regular progress reports to parents. Provide support services and follow-up conferences as needed.					
◆ Disseminate information on school reforms, policies, discipline procedures, assessment tools, and school goals, including parents in any related decision-making process.					
◆ Conduct conferences with parents at least twice a year, with follow-up as needed, that accommodate the varied schedules of parents, language barriers, and the need for childcare.					
◆ Encourage immediate contact between parents and teachers when concerns arise.					

Quality Indicators for Family Involvement (cont.)					
COMPONENT	Always Done	Frequently Done	Rarely Done	Not Done	Something to Try
◆ Distribute student work for parental comment and review on a regular basis.					
◆ Translate communications to assist non-English speaking parents.					
◆ Communicate with parents regarding positive student behavior and achievement, not just regarding misbehavior or failure.					
◆ Provide opportunities for parents to communicate with principals and other administrative staff.					
◆ Promote informal activities at which parents, staff, and community members can interact.					
◆ Provide staff development regarding effective communication techniques and the importance of regular two-way communication between the school and the home.					
Learning at Home					
◆ Seek and encourage parent participation in decision making that affects students.					
◆ Inform parents of the expectations for students in each subject at each grade level.					
◆ Provide information regarding how parents can foster learning at home, give appropriate assistance, monitor homework, and give feedback to teachers.					
◆ Regularly assign interactive homework that will require students to discuss and interact with their parents about what they are learning in class.					
◆ Sponsor workshops or distribute information to assist parents in understanding how students can improve skills, get help when needed, meet class expectations, and perform well on assessments.					
◆ Involve parents in setting student goals each year and in planning for post-secondary education and careers. Encourage the development of a personalized education plan for each student, where parents are full partners.					
◆ Provide opportunities for staff members to learn and share successful approaches to engaging parents in their child's education.					

Quality Indicators for Family Involvement (cont.).					
COMPONENT	Always Done	Frequently Done	Rarely Done	Not Done	Something to Try
Volunteering					
◆ Ensure that office staff greetings, signs near the entrances, and any other interaction with parents creates a climate in which parents feel valued and welcome.					
◆ Survey parents regarding interests and availability, and then coordinate the parent resources with those that exist within the school and among the faculty.					
◆ Ensure that parents who are unable to volunteer in the school building are given options for helping in other ways, at home or place of employment.					
◆ Organize an easily accessible program for utilizing parent volunteers; provide ample training to volunteers.					
◆ Develop a system for contacting all parents to assist as the year progresses.					
◆ Design opportunities for those with limited time and resources to participate by addressing childcare, transportation, and so forth.					
◆ Show appreciation for parents' participation and value their diverse contributions.					
◆ Educate and assist staff members in creating an inviting climate and in effectively using volunteer resources.					
◆ Ensure that volunteer activities are meaningful and build on volunteer interests and abilities.					
Decision Making					
◆ Provide understandable, accessible, and well-publicized processes for influencing decisions, raising issues or concerns, appealing decisions, and resolving problems.					
◆ Encourage the formation of PTAs or other parent groups to identify and respond to issues of interest to parents.					
◆ Include parents on all decision-making and advisory committees and ensure adequate training for such areas as policy, curriculum, budget, school reform initiatives, safety, and personnel. Where a site governance body exists, give equal representation to parents.					
◆ Provide parents with current information regarding school policies, practices, and both student and school performance data.					

Quality Indicators for Family Involvement (cont.)					
COMPONENT	Always Done	Frequently Done	Rarely Done	Not Done	Something to Try
◆ Enable parents to participate as partners when setting school goals, developing or evaluating programs and policies, or responding to performance data.					
◆ Encourage and facilitate active parent participation in the decisions that affect students, such as student placement, course selection, and individual personalized education plans.					
◆ Treat parent concerns with respect and demonstrate genuine interest in developing solutions.					
◆ Promote parent participation on school district, state, and national committees and issues.					
◆ Provide training for all staff and parents on collaborative partnering and shared decision making.					
Collaboration with the Community					
◆ Distribute information regarding cultural, recreational, academic, health, social, and other resources that serve families within the community.					
◆ Develop partnerships with local business and service groups to advance student learning and assist schools and families.					
◆ Encourage employers to adopt policies and practices that promote and support adult participation in children's education.					
◆ Foster student participation in community service.					
◆ Involve community members in school volunteer programs.					
◆ Disseminate information to the school community, including those without school-age children, regarding school programs and performance.					
◆ Collaborate with community agencies to provide family support services and adult learning opportunities, enabling parents to more fully participate in activities that support education.					
◆ Inform staff members of the resources available in the community and strategies for using those resources.					

Source: *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs,* National PTA, 1998.

programs. If your school is one, a good starting place for your enhancement initiatives is to take a look at the kinds of involvement desired by both teachers and parents.

As you begin to look at and then enhance your family involvement program, it is important to identify the areas in which you want more involvement. To help ensure that your parents and staff "buy in" to your family involvement program, and more importantly, to ensure that it meets their needs, we strongly recommend you survey both teachers and parents.

Involving Staff in the Planning Process—Parents have the greatest contact with the school through their children's teachers. The best parent involvement strategies rely on direct, personal contact between family members and school staff (Stein and Thorkildsen 1999). Therefore, teacher behaviors and attitudes are key to encouraging family involvement (Rutherford 1995).

One good reason to survey teachers about their perceptions and needs is to ensure their commitment to your schoolwide emphasis on family involvement. Hester (1989) stresses that when teachers and other staff are active in the planning of a parent involvement effort, they are more likely to support the effort strongly and enthusiastically. Therefore, asking teachers where they want to see more parent involvement is an important first step in securing teacher buy-in.

Getting teachers on board may not be easy. Initially, teachers may shy away from undertaking additional family involvement strategies because they "have no time." They also may fear that involving parents as volunteers will not be useful, or will even interfere with their instructional activities.

School leaders can encourage teachers' commitment by being clear about the possible benefits of parent involvement, not only to the school and students in general, but to teachers themselves. When teachers commit to increasing parent involvement, parents tend to be "more positive about the teacher's interpersonal skills, and [to rate] the teacher higher in overall teaching ability" (Epstein 1983). By participating in school projects and events, family members begin to relate to the school and its staff with more respect and openness. Teachers often feel more relaxed, safer, and less distracted by crises that interfere with teaching.

In addition to promoting teacher buy-in, a survey of teachers will enable you to make sure that parent volunteers are really accomplishing tasks that need to be done. Teachers must feel that their efforts to involve parents will lead to meaningful results that truly contribute to improving instruction for their students. The sample teacher survey on pages 19-20 can be used to get teachers' input, perspectives, and advice. You may want to modify the survey (for example, by listing different "Possible areas for parent involvement") to fit your own school's needs and resources.

Teacher and Staff Survey, Family Involvement

For each of the areas listed below, indicate with a check mark whether you would like more parent/family involvement. Describe the kinds of help you would like. Then, indicate with numbers 1-5 your top five priority areas.

Possible areas for parent involvement	We could use more help from parents in this area.	Specifically, what help could you personally use, and when?	Number your top 5 priority areas.
Parenting at home			
Helping with homework			
Working on attendance, tardiness issues			
Volunteering at the school			
Working in the classroom			
Assisting with special programs			
Helping prepare materials (laminating, cutting shapes, preparing games)			
Decorating bulletin boards			
Tutoring			
Mentoring			
Helping in the office			
Assisting with registration			
Holiday party helpers			
Field trip assistance			
Helping the school nurse			
Library aides			
Serving as an advisor or decision maker on an advisory committee or board			
Curriculum committees			
Being a member of the school improvement team			

Teacher and Staff Survey, Family Involvement (cont.)			
Possible areas for parent involvement	**We could use more help from parents in this area.**	**Specifically, what help could you personally use, and when?**	**Number your top 5 priority areas.**
Developing cultural diversity programs			
Working on discipline policy			
Working with community resources to strengthen school programs			
Fundraising			
Campus beautification/ graffiti patrol			
Safety (playground, neighborhood safehouses, parent patrol)			
Hosting informal neighborhood discussion groups on school issues			
Testifying on behalf of the school before city council or other education legislative committees in the community			
Securing business partners for the school			
Add other appropriate areas of family involvement below.			
Your name and grade or subject area:			

Involving Parents in the Planning Process—Once the school has narrowed the areas where assistance is most wanted by teachers, it is important to survey parents to determine their specific areas of interest. It will be of little use to direct your efforts towards involving more families in areas where they are unwilling or unable to serve. In addition, asking parents to be involved in the planning process is, in itself, a form of parent involvement that will increase their sense of connection to the school.

The sample parent cover letter and survey on pages 22-24 complement the teacher survey. (A Spanish-language version is included in Appendix A.) To adapt this survey to your school's needs, you might list options for parent involvement based on the areas of need identified by teachers on your school's teacher involvement survey. In addition, the options for additional information should be based on questions that your school is prepared to answer.

Encouraging Parents to Participate—Getting a sufficient number of parents to return the surveys is sometimes a challenge. Consider the following strategies:

- Have surveys available at parent-teacher conferences.
- Provide a pizza party or other prize to the class with the highest return rate.
- If families live in a concentrated area, consider hiring a few parents to go door-to-door securing answers.

Be sure to report the results of the survey to parents. This will underscore the fact that you are taking their input seriously.

Launching the Family Involvement Improvement Plan

The information gathered in staff and parent surveys can serve as the basis for your school's efforts to enhance its current family involvement efforts. Common areas in the staff and parent surveys are the best places to begin. Don't be disappointed if an area identified as "high need" by staff is not high on the family members' list. Volunteers are more likely to stay and contribute if they are working in areas that interest them, so some negotiation may be required.

Try not to be overly ambitious. Start small and work on achieving success in a couple of areas. You may be able to combine some areas, but fight the temptation to lump too many together. It is important to be able to show in concrete ways that the contributions of parents and staff are making a difference, and this is always easier if you focus on discrete, modestly sized initiatives. You can always expand your efforts later.

Once two or three parent involvement areas have been identified for initial action, task forces—with staff and parent members—can begin to develop implementation plans.

Sample Cover Letter for Parent Survey, Family Involvement

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Families play an important role in the school success of children. There are many different ways that you can get involved and support your child's learning. Whether you attend PTA meetings, volunteer in your child's classroom, help with the book fair, or just read with your child at home each night, you are making a contribution that will help your child do well in school.

Family involvement is strong at *(name of school)*, but we'd like to make it even better and make sure our program meets the needs of parents, students, and teachers. You can help us form a better partnership between school and home by answering the questions on the enclosed survey.

Please return the completed survey to your child's teacher, or put it in the box in the school office, by October 1.

If you have any questions about the survey or about our school's current family involvement opportunities, please don't hesitate to give me a call. My number is *(phone number)*, and I can be most easily reached during the hours of *(hours you prefer to be called)*. I'm always glad to talk with you.

Sincerely,

Parent Survey, Family Involvement

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Our school is in the process of strengthening our family involvement program. Thank you for helping us by answering the questions below.

Of the following types of involvement that teachers have identified as helpful, I would be willing to:	CIRCLE UP TO 3 AREAS WHERE YOU WOULD BE WILLING TO HELP: ☐ Contact other parents to let them know about upcoming activities ☐ Volunteer in the classroom ☐ Help out with field trips and special projects ☐ Help in the office, lunchroom, or playground ☐ Help with fundraising ☐ Serve on a schoolwide committee ☐ Host parent meetings in my home ☐ Work in the community to build support for the school ☐ Provide general help where needed ☐ Other (please list)_____
Here are some topics I am interested in learning more about:	CIRCLE THE 3 THAT ARE YOUR TOP CHOICES: ☐ What are the school's learning standards? ☐ What are the statewide tests, and how can I know how my child is doing? ☐ What are the school's standards of behavior? ☐ How can I get information about effective parenting practices? ☐ Are we sure our students are safe while in school? To and from school? ☐ How can I help with homework? ☐ What is the school doing about social issues? (cliques, bullies, etc.) ☐ Are alcohol, tobacco, and drugs an issue in our school? ☐ Do we have a gang problem? ☐ How can I help my child do better in school? Other topics: _____ _____ _____

Parent Survey, Family Involvement (cont.)		
I prefer to be contacted by:	❑ Phone ❑ Email ❑ Mail ❑ Note home with my child	
The best time to reach me is:	❑ Morning ❑ Afternoon ❑ Evening ❑ Weekends	
I'm available to help:	❑ During the school day (which days?) ❑ During the evening ❑ Early in the morning before classes ❑ Weekends ❑ I can't come to school but am willing to do things at home. ❑ I am flexible if given enough time.	
In order for me to attend events at the school, I need:	Childcare: ❑ Yes ❑ No Transportation: ❑ Yes ❑ No Other special needs: ❑ Translation service ❑ Interpreter for the deaf ❑ Other _____	
The language spoken in our home is:	❑ English ❑ Spanish ❑ Other _____	
	Mother (or other caretaker)	Father (or other caretaker)
Name		
Address		
Zip Code		
Phone	Home: Work:	Home: Work:
Email		
Names and grades of children		
Any other questions or concerns:		
Thanks for your help!		

An important first step for the task force members is to recognize the common challenges schools face when attempting to boost family involvement, and to come up with strategies to overcome the challenges. According to the research summarized by Caplan (2000), these challenges may include:

- **Limited family resources.** Time, money, scheduling, transportation, childcare, having younger children at home, and working outside of the home all make it difficult for parents to attend meetings or volunteer at the school. These restraints apply to families at all economic levels. While parents overwhelmingly state that education is of primary importance, a recent poll (Public Education Network 2001) found that after taking care of work and family obligations, most respondents felt they had at most three hours per week to devote to schools.
- **Lack of staff time and opportunity.** Lack of time is also a concern of teachers and administrators. Their workday is already filled and demanding. Few teachers have office space or a telephone to meet or call parents during the school day (National Council of Jewish Women undated).
- **Lack of information.** Parents report that they often don't know how to be involved, feel intimidated, and don't think they are qualified to participate in school projects (National Council of Jewish Women undated). Many wonder, " If I question some procedure, will my child be punished by a teacher or a principal who is annoyed that I asked?"
- **Uncertainty on the part of school staff.** Working with parents is not part of the traditional teacher preparation curriculum. Many teachers feel uneasy about working with parents on committees, having parents in their classrooms, or becoming more aware of the family conditions of their students. Often teachers need help understanding some families' customs, cultures, and traditions. Some may need and want training on how to be sensitive and interact positively with families that differ from their own. There is also the concern (hopefully unfounded) that closer relationships with families will mean giving up power and dimensions of professional decision making (Drake 2000).
- **Cultural diversity within the school community.** As the student bodies of our schools become more diverse, additional challenges arise. The school may need to find ways of communicating with parents in different languages, including translating written materials into non-English languages. Parents may find it hard to relate to one another because of diverse backgrounds (National Council of Jewish Women undated)
- **Social and economic challenges:** In some schools, many parents are overwhelmed by their social and economic circumstances. For these parents, a focus on survival needs such as food and shelter typically take precedence over seeing that homework is done. Often these families move frequently

and have fewer ties with the school. In schools with high mobility rates, it is hard for staff to invest in working with families who may leave the area in a month or two.

The analysis tool on page 27 is provided as an example of how you might want to open discussions about an implementation plan with your school's parent-staff action groups. Although the information that comes from this analysis will be helpful, its real value comes from the discussion and solutions it generates.

Assessing Commitment

Even when school systems acknowledge that parent involvement is important, it is only one of several important things competing for scarce school resources—time, personnel, and dollars. Where does "increasing family involvement" fit in the list of priorities for your school? If it is near the top, then resources must be devoted to the task.

The key resource is time. School leaders need to search aggressively for ways to free up staff time for family involvement. Doing this might require hiring substitutes, reorganizing the schedule, or periodically doubling up classes.

The Massachusetts Department of Education's Office of Community Education (1990), in its guide for administrators, encourages principals to provide an invaluable service to the school community by ensuring that:

- adequate funding exists to support programs;
- space and equipment needs are met;
- the teaching and specialty staffs receive regular training and development; and
- the community is invited to play meaningful and appropriate roles in the school.

Some schools have gone so far as to find funds for a parent/family liaison to coordinate home/school activities. In some districts, this is a paid non-teaching position. The parent/family liaison might contact families to set up appointments, make home visits, and staff a family room in the school. Personal contacts, especially from people in the community, are important in encouraging hard-to-reach families to participate.

When considering strategies to increase parent involvement, keep in mind what schools can really accomplish. Set goals, assess progress periodically, and make adjustments when necessary. Only then can the promise of parent involvement become a reality.

Challenges to Family Involvement Program			
Our challenge	How much of a challenge is it? 1 – not serious 2 – somewhat serious 3 – quite serious 4 – don't know	Ideas to overcome the challenge	What we will try
Limited family resources			
Lack of staff time and opportunity			
Lack of information			
School staff's uncertainty			
Cultural diversity within the school			
Social and economic challenges			

Questions for Principals to Think about as They Get Ready to Develop Family Involvement Programs

- How do I, the principal, view the role of parents in the operation of the school and in their children's education?
- Do I talk about family partnerships? Where and when? What expectations are placed on teachers regarding partnering with parents?
- Does the school's budget include funds (preferably a line item) supporting family involvement?
- Is there a person on staff dedicated to increasing family involvement in the school?
- To what extent are parents included in school decision making? Are parents invited to curriculum meetings? School improvement planning teams? Professional development workshops?

Evaluating Your Results

"If you don't have a destination in mind, you'll never know when you get there."

This classic quote from Evaluation 101 (Hedrick, Bickman, and Rog 1993) applies to your parent involvement efforts. Once you have decided to invest your own and your staff's time to develop a plan to enhance parent involvement—not to mention the time of any parents who have worked on the plan—you need to be clear about long-range goals and the benchmarks you will use to measure progress and success. And you should set these goals and benchmarks at the earliest stages of planning.

Although you really have to name specific goals for your own efforts based on your school's unique circumstances, there are some sample, global outcomes we can list that are related to the different types of parent involvement. If you begin to see these things happening, you will know your efforts are beginning to pay off.

Parenting

- Fewer instances of children being tardy
- Fewer instances of children sleeping or being listless in class

- Fewer discipline problems
- Fewer examples of students not being prepared for class, not completing homework, etc.
- More parent inquiries about their children's progress, ability to do school work, etc.
- More teacher-generated "home learning" materials and suggestions going to parents
- More school-generated educational, health, and child welfare information going to parents

Communicating

- Greater attendance at parent conferences and school functions specifically for parents
- Greater family attendance at student functions such as student plays, sports days, assemblies, etc.
- Increase in "drop-in" visits from parents
- More probing questions from parents inquiring about their children's school work
- More frequent and diverse communications going from teachers and from school to families

Volunteering

- Increase in the number of volunteer opportunities (i.e., more staff open to having parent volunteers)
- More substantive volunteer activities (i.e., beyond "cookie baking")
- More parent volunteers overall
- More parent volunteers for activities where you usually have trouble getting volunteers (fund-raising activities, tutoring activities)
- Increase in the number of different parents volunteering (i.e., ones who typically do not)

Learning at Home

- More teacher-designed "learn at home" activities and materials at all grade levels
- "Learn at home" activities and materials in more different subject areas
- Parents asking for "learn at home" suggestions
- Children having less difficulty with "tough" subjects (where teachers have sent and parents have used "learn at home" materials)

- Parents asking for help developing their own "learn at home" materials and activities

Decision Making

- Parent participation in developing the family involvement plan
- Increase in the number of opportunities for parents to have substantive input
- More parent slots on steering committees, advisory councils, improvement teams, etc.
- Parents participating enthusiastically and appropriately (i.e., not as a political forum) in decision-making opportunities
- Parents participating in decision making who typically did not in the past
- Better, more balanced, and comprehensive decisions

Collaboration with Community

- Increase in the number of community agency linkages
- Parents actively promoting or establishing these linkages
- Increased use of community agencies by school or families
- Parents recommending potential agencies to link with
- Increase in amount of resources coming to school from community agencies or businesses
- Tighter coordination of community-based youth development efforts and school

Summary

This chapter has described a process you can use to decide whether increased family involvement would be beneficial to your school, to assess the interests of teachers and parents, and to implement and assess the results of new family involvement activities. If your improvement efforts are based on solid information about the needs and capacities of teachers, students, and parents, you are likely to see at least some of the positive changes mentioned above.

As you select and implement new programs, it's important to make sure that your efforts are undergirded by a caring and welcoming schoolwide climate and by excellent communication among all members of the school community. The following chapters deal with these issues.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas:

Improving Communication with Families

Effective communication strategies are the cornerstone of strong relationships between schools and families. A survey of educators revealed the following skills as important when working with families:

- conducting effective conferences;
- working with parents when the student has a problem;
- communicating with parents about student progress; and
- helping parents understand class goals, strategies, and methods of assessment (Nathan and Radcliffe 1994).

At the heart of each of these skills is effective communication.

The more parents and teachers share information about a student, the better equipped they will become to help that student achieve success. If families are to assist learning at home, they will need to know what their children are learning and how best to support that learning. And a teacher's job is easier when he/she better understands how the parent views the student's personality, learning style, and any home situations that might have an impact on learning.

Communication should occur in a variety of forms, including face-to-face meetings, written notices, and where feasible, technology-assisted formats. Families should have easy access to a calendar of school events and holidays, information about how to contact a teacher, and a listing of day-to-day logistics—transportation timetables, homework expectations, and daily schedules. In this chapter, we discuss these different modes of communication. We also briefly review what information should be communicated about two key areas that concern parents the most: testing and homework.

What Messages Are You Sending to Parents?

Be aware—and make sure your staff is aware—that each communication between school and home broadcasts a message about the school's attitude toward parents and students. Consider the messages that each of these actions might send to a parent:

- The principal makes evening hours available for appointments with working parents. In the school's monthly newsletter, she prints her phone number and invites parents to call during certain hours.
- A teacher fails to return the parent's phone call.
- Important information about school events is published on the school Web site but is not conveyed to parents in any other way.
- Two weeks before the child begins kindergarten, the parent receives a welcoming phone call from the child's teacher. In a 10-minute conversation, the teacher asks, "Tell me what I should know about your child. Do you have any questions or concerns about your child's first few days in school?" She ends by saying how much she is looking forward to having the child in her class and getting to know the parent better.

Source: *Productive Communication with Parents: Cornerstone of Home-School Partnership (Informed Educator Series)*, Educational Research Service, 1999b.

Print Communication

The most common form of communication between the school and the home is printed materials. Schools frequently send home notes, newsletters, and handbooks in an effort to share information with family members.

While print is reasonably priced and relatively easy to produce, it does have some serious drawbacks. The likelihood of a print piece reaching the home via the child—the most economical method—decreases as children grow older. It's one thing to pin a note on the jacket of a kindergartner and be relatively certain that the parent will see it; parents of middle school students rarely go through backpacks, and notes from school are often the last thing on the mind of the preadolescent. In today's linguistically diverse schoolhouse, notes in English are often not understood by

parents, and the cost of translating negates the economy of print. And then there are the parents who cannot or do not read.

Despite the drawbacks, print communication does have a role to play in a broader communication strategy. The following are some of the most common print formats.

Newsletters. Many schools use newsletters to provide a steady stream of information from the school to the home. (See the sample newsletter in Appendix A.) They are a relatively inexpensive way of informing families of school activities. Newsletter production can involve parents as editors, reporters, and graphic designers. Timely, brief, and lively reporting are the hallmarks of a good newsletter. Some content suggestions might be:

- a column by the principal;
- upcoming school social events;
- dates and times of conferences and tests;
- a feature article about a member of the staff;
- a "bravo section" highlighting student accomplishments in sports, academics and the arts; and
- parent education hints (how to read to children; or tips on curtailing TV viewing) (Boone and Barclay 1995; Educational Research Service 1999b).

To promote two-way communication, consider having a "letters to the newsletter" column or short surveys seeking reader opinions on a variety of topics (Moles 1996). Distributing the newsletter via the students is less costly, but direct mail provides more of a guarantee that the newsletter will reach home.

Beginning-of-year letters. It's always a good idea to establish contact with families right at the start of the school year. A first-day letter provides a wonderful introduction. Such letters can come from both principals and teachers. Their content will vary depending on the unique circumstances and plans of the school and classroom, but each should certainly welcome families and share goals for the coming year. Johnson (1999) recommends that the teacher letter provide vital information about:

- what students will be studying in the coming year;
- homework policies;
- special events—class assemblies, field trips. etc.;
- classroom rules;
- ways that parents' help would be appreciated; and
- the preferred way of contacting the teacher with questions or concerns.

This kind of letter is a good way to set the tone of open communication and active parent involvement right away with both staff and parents. Appendix A contains sample beginning-of-the-year letters from both the teacher and the principal. Schoolwide policy should encourage teachers to send such a letter home the first day of the school year.

School calendar. A large, bright, easy-to-read calendar highlighting major school events—assemblies, graduation, teacher inservice days, report card days, etc.—shows that the school is aware that busy parents need ample notice about school events. (See the sample calendar page in Appendix A.) Sometimes a local business will underwrite the cost in return for an ad placement. The yearly calendar may also be a good project for your parent-teacher association to sponsor.

A calendar covering the entire year's important events will be very helpful; but think about sending families monthly calendars, too. They can be part of your parent newsletter, and it's likely that busy families will appreciate these monthly reminders.

Face-to-Face Communication

A key limitation of print material is that it is primarily one-way communication, with the school providing information to the family. Face-to-face communication, either in person or by phone or email, provides the greatest opportunity for the sharing of information between home and the school. The outcome of effective face-to-face communication with families can be greater mutual knowledge, enhanced trust, and a joint plan of action to help students succeed (Chrispeels 1990). Remember, though, that these beneficial outcomes require time and planning. Weigh these two scarce resources at your school as you consider your face-to-face options.

Parent-teacher conferences. The typical conference takes place between the parent and the classroom teacher. As the school leader, you should ensure that your staff has the time, appropriate space, and requisite skills for effectively conducting a parent conference. It would be good to provide staff with communication training and the opportunity to role-play common situations prior to the conference season.

The parent-teacher conference often is the only time teachers and parents have a chance to talk together about student progress. Conferences are also a great time to get parents to sign any necessary forms. Most conferences are designed with four purposes in mind:

- sharing of information about a student's progress in class;
- gathering information about factors in the child's home life that may have an impact on school performance;

- joint problem solving; and
- developing trust.

Accomplishing these four purposes requires forethought and planning. First of all, the teacher should select a private and comfortable place to hold the conference. Establishing an atmosphere of trust will be impossible if the teacher and parents are forced to talk in the hallway or in a room with other children and adults. If possible, there should be a room specifically designated for conferences. If the conference is held in the classroom, the teacher should put a note on the door so that others will not interrupt. Parents and the teacher should sit around a table. The parent should not have to sit at the student's desk or in a child-size chair (Decker and Decker 2000).

As the conference begins, the teacher should be clear about what information she or he wants to share, and present it in a straightforward, respectful manner. Examples of student work and tests should be available to illustrate the teacher's comments. In addition to sharing the learning objectives of a particular grade, the teacher should provide examples of successful student work.

If the child is having behavior problems, the teacher should report specific incidents rather than generalizations. A calm demeanor and concrete examples eliminate confrontation and allow parents and teachers to analyze the situation together.

Using Conferences to Listen to Parents

Educators at The New City School in St. Louis, Missouri, hold the first parent-teacher conferences the last week of September and use them to set academic, behavioral, and social goals for students. School Director Thomas Hoerr explains, "We called them 'Intake Conferences' and told the participants that we expected parents to do the talking—and teachers to do the listening—75 to 80 percent of the time. 'You've known your children for years,' I explained in a letter to parents, 'and we've only had them for a few weeks'" (Hoerr 1997, 41).

Teachers are given a list of questions for parents about their children (What are your goals for your child this year? What is your child's activity schedule away from school?) and about diversity issues (Would you share a bit about your family's heritage? What holidays does your family celebrate?) This list helps ensure that parents talk and teachers listen.

Source: *Productive Communication with Parents: Cornerstone of the Home-School Partnership (Informed Educator Series)*, Educational Research Service, 1999b.

Another helpful tip for teachers is to use language that steers away from confrontation and promotes cooperation. Instead of " Your child has poor work habits," consider "I find it difficult to motivate your child. Here are some things I've tried. What do you think will help?" Instead of "Your child is on the verge of failing," consider "In order for your child to have a chance of passing, we will need to work on..." (Berger 1991).

It is vital to provide an atmosphere where the parent can share information and concerns. The teacher should always ask for the opinions of family members and show respect for their contributions. She or he should plan on spending at least half the time listening.

Some families may need special accommodations to make the most of conferences. Translators should be available if needed. However, it is essential to use staff members or community volunteers rather than other parents or the student as volunteer translators, in order to maintain the family's privacy. If childcare is an issue, the school can arrange for younger children to be entertained during the conference.

The teacher should also try to keep focused on the conference objectives and topics. Typically, teachers and parents both have limited time. If time runs out before all topics have been covered, more time should be scheduled later. Try not to let too much time elapse between the two conferences, though.

An atmosphere of trust is essential for effective parent-teacher conferences. If there are learning or behavior problems, it is important to look at the context in which these occur and develop a plan of action. Both parent and teacher should be clear about the solutions each will implement. Clark (1999) advises that it is often helpful to include the child in the solution-planning phase. Children are better able to monitor their behavior when they are clear about what to expect and what is expected of them. Both parents and teachers need to be prepared for the conference (Price and Marsh 1985; National Education Association 2000; National Center for Learning Disabilities undated). The rubric on page 38 provides a structure for this preparation. Appendix B reproduces this information on two separate pages, which are formatted to use as handouts for teachers and parents when formal parent-teacher conferences are coming up.

Parent-principal conferences. While most conferences occur between the parent and the teacher, there are instances when the parents and the principal need to talk. Some of these occasions will be positive or neutral, as when the parent wants information about a school program. In other cases, however, the reason for the conference may be that the child is having serious problems that go beyond the scope of the teacher's authority. Such conferences can be uncomfortable for both the principal and the parents.

How Teachers and Parents Can Make the Most of Conferences

For Teachers

Before the conference

- Review your records and jot down the key points you want to share.
- Remember that the conference is a time to gather information as well as give it. List the questions you have for the parent.
- Make sure that you have a quiet, private space to hold the conference.

During the conference

- Begin on time.
- Begin and end on a positive note.
- Use both the parent's and the child's name.
- Remember to invite the parent to talk about his or her concerns and insights about the child's needs. *Listen,* and repeat back (paraphrase) what the parent has said.
- If you have problems to share, be prepared to offer one or two possible solutions. Ask the parent for his or her solutions as well.
- Summarize the agreed-on plan of action.
- Before ending, check that the parent has understood what you have said. A good way to summarize the conference is to say, "We're almost at the end of our time and I want to be sure that I've been clear. Tell me please what you've learned about your child's progress in school."

After the conference

- Make a note of anything you promised to follow up on. And make sure you do follow up.
- If the parent will be working on some things with the child, contact them in two or three weeks to see how things are going and report any changes.

For Parents

Before the conference

- Talk with your child. Find out what your child sees as his or her best and worst subjects. Ask your child if there is anything he or she wants you to discuss with the teacher.
- Jot down a few notes about what you want to talk about, especially any concerns you have.

During the conference

- Arrive on time.
- Ask your most important questions first—time is often limited. Some good questions to ask include: What are my child's areas of strength and weakness? Is my child working up to his or her ability? How well does my child get along with others?
- Ask the teacher for specific suggestions on how you might help your child do better.

After the conference

- Discuss the conference with your child.
- Follow through on suggestions agreed upon at the conference.
- Follow up with the teacher to see that needed improvements are occurring.

In the case of severe discipline problems where suspension or expulsion may be an option, it is important that the principal be aware that this is a highly charged situation with potential legal implications. Keep in mind the following:

- Remember that the parent is upset about the situation. Have the meeting in your office and ensure that there are no interruptions.
- Keep the discussion focused on the issue at hand. Be sure that you can document what has happened.
- Explain the relevant school or district policy. Check to make sure that the parent understands where the principal has latitude and where he or she must follow district policies.
- Explain any and all legal options that the family has.
- Provide ample time for questions. Try to engage the parent in developing a plan for improving the situation.
- Before ending the conference, set a time to speak again and assess progress.

Sometimes parents will request a meeting with the principal because they are unhappy about a situation with their child's teacher. In these cases, it is important that the principal support the staff member and urge the parent to first bring the issue up with the teacher. If after working with the teacher, the parent still has concerns, the principal may assume a mediating role.

Home visits. While very labor intensive, home visits can set a tone of mutual understanding that makes ensuing communications more effective. The major purpose of a home visit should be to strengthen the relationship between the family and the school. Thus it can be less formal and focused than the conference. Remember, however, it is definitely not an opportunity to pry, and some families will need reassurance.

During a home visit, even an informal one, staff can learn what services or special considerations students or families might need and how the school can help. Parents can learn whether they can trust the school staff and feel more comfortable voicing concerns. Visitors, to be effective, must enter the home with a positive attitude and be non-judgmental. Appendix B provides a checklist of Do's and Don'ts for home visits, which can be reproduced and given to teachers.

Family learning events. The school can sponsor discussion groups, workshops, or similar "educational" functions where parents acquire or fine-tune skills to help them better understand and work with their children. When possible, these should be events that parents and children can participate in together rather than formal classes. Modeling ways to incorporate learning into everyday activities is probably more effective than lectures.

One School's Approach to Home Visits

Franklin Elementary School
Massillon, Ohio

During the 1997-98 school year, Franklin Elementary School decided it wanted to increase family and community involvement. Two of the strategies the school developed to achieve this goal were home visits and a Community Gala.

The general idea of this project was for all teachers to visit the homes of each child in their classrooms at the beginning of the school year. During the home visits, teachers personally invited the parents to the Community Gala to be held at the end of September. Parents also were given information on how to help with their child's homework, and invited to volunteer any time at Franklin Elementary.

The Community Gala was similar to a traditional open house but also included a Town Meeting conducted by the Mayor of Massillon. At this community event, all parents and community members were asked to sign a Promise Keeper Chart denoting ways they would support their child's learning. Students and staff members also signed charts agreeing to their responsibilities in the learning partnership.

Home visits at first presented a challenge. Teachers were initially hesitant to make the visits because of safety issues in the community. The principal worked closely with staff members and made many visits with the teachers. Some teachers also made home visits together. This process provided the safety measures needed, especially for new teachers to the building who weren't familiar with the community.

The Franklin staff is now committed to making home visits at the beginning of each school year. Teachers feel comfortable with visiting students' homes and have seen the increased participation of families in our school.

Parent comments have been extremely favorable about the home visits. In fact, one parent stated, "I have never had a teacher come to my home to visit until I moved here! It was great for my daughter as well as myself."

Source: *Home Visits, Community Gala, and Promise Keepers Charts: Promising Partnership Practices*, K. Long, 1999.

Family Learning is Especially Important for Families with Language Challenges

Randolph Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, provides an example of using family learning events to meet the special challenge of involving immigrant families. The school's 600 students speak more than 22 different primary languages, and English is the second language for most of them. About 64 percent of the students are Hispanic, and about 80 percent are from non-English-speaking homes.

Three years ago, the school developed an evening program to promote school involvement of non-English-speaking parents. Called Family Night School, this program is designed to make families of immigrant kindergarten children entering school more comfortable with the school, and to help them make learning an integral part of their family lives.

Family Night School is offered in several sessions each year, with each session consisting of about five meetings. A typical session includes a community dinner, parent training in some aspect of school involvement or helping their children develop the skills they need in school, instruction for students in basic reading and math skills, and paired parent-child activities.

The program plays a positive role in building a partnership between the school and these parents, whom many would consider "hard to reach." Says a staff member, "Success is sensed from being there, working with the parents and students, and watching their comfort level with the school setting grow over time."

Source: "Family Night Boosts Immigrant Students' Success Through Active Parent Involvement," *ERS Successful School Practices,* K. Panfil, 2001.

A "Brown Bag Story Hour" where parents bring some food and a book to read to their own or someone else's child will probably entice more participants than a discussion of the importance of reading. A "Math in the Kitchen" evening where everyone gets to sample culinary creations will be more popular than a program on how to tutor your child in math.

Pay special attention to how you title these programs. Negative titles such as "Surviving Early Adolescence" may discourage parents who are fearful of admitting

that they are having problems with their children. "Living with Pre-Teenagers and Loving It" is a more inviting title. The informal interaction between school staff and parents in these types of events builds familiarity and contributes to mutual trust and understanding. These events also can be fun and interesting.

Other Forms of Communication

Telephoning. Typically, a call home from the schools means something has gone wrong. As an alternative, try using a telephone call to deliver good—or even routine—news from time to time. Consider the positive impact when parents receive a phone call letting them know what progress their child is making or asking whether they need any information about school events.

To be most effective, parents need to receive several phone calls over the course of the school year (Moles 1996). Before the call, however, be sure to consider:

- The content of the call. Staying focused will keep the call brief.
- The tone of the call. Sounding friendly and positive will put the parent at ease quickly.
- Follow-up to the call. If plans or agreements are made, they should be noted and implemented (Johnson 1999).

As a school leader, you know that even a simple phone call requires extra effort. The sample scripts in Appendix A are a useful tools for structuring the phone call and making sure the tone is kept positive.

Time is also a barrier to making good use of phone calls. Often the best time to reach parents is in the evening and on weekends. If the school is serious about instituting a telephone calling strategy, you will need to provide resources and some kind of compensation for this to happen. To reach families three times over the course of the year, a teacher with a class of 25 students would have to schedule three calls a week. At five to seven minutes a call, this would add an additional 20 minutes a week to the teacher's work time. By encouraging teachers to focus on the potential outcomes, principals can minimize the onus of the extra time.

Whoever makes phone calls to parents should have a quiet, private place from which to do so. Consider investing in one or two wireless phones that can be used in the classroom, the faculty lounge, or at home to make these calls. If periodic routine calls to the home are to be made, teachers will most likely need to schedule these into their weekly routines. Consider including with weekly lesson plans a schedule of calls to the home.

Email and Web pages. Electronic forms of communication can cut down on the time it takes to share information with families. It is relatively easy to develop group emails that enable the principal or teacher to share information with all parents or even with those in a particular classroom.

A school Web site can contain the calendar, listing of major school events, and a listing of staff email addresses. Classroom pages provide easy access to contact information, classroom rules, and learning expectations. Commercial Web sites (for example, www.highwired.com; www.achieve.com) exist that make it relatively easy to post homework assignments and examples of student work. With a password, parents can even access attendance records and a listing of their child's grades (Johnson 2000).

If your school does not yet have its own Web site, the first thing to do is talk with the staff who work in your computer lab. They may consider this a project for some older students. Some of them may already have experience designing Web sites.

Spend some time reviewing Web pages from other schools and note the things you would like to include in your Web site. Talk with your staff—there may be one or two people who would like to have an opportunity to learn about Web page development. With commercial software, much of the programming is eliminated.

Before expending a great deal of energy on this project, however, get a sense of who will use it. How many of your families have Internet access—not just a

Online Sources of Information about School Web Sites

The following online resources are worth checking out:

- Links to exemplary school Web sites can be found on the Web site of the West Central Four Intermediate Service Agency in Illinois at www.wc4.org/expemplary_school_web_sites.htm.
- A guide to "Designing Exemplary School Web Sites," prepared by graduate students of the educational technology school at Texas A&M University, Corpus Cristi, can be found at www.caller.com/grantms/schoolweb.html.
- Links to and reviews of model school Web sites and guidelines for designing them can be found on the "Bright Sites" page sponsored by the South Central Regional Technology in Education Consortium: products.hprtec.org/bright_sites.

computer—at home? If not at home, does their workplace allow them access? If the digital divide is an issue in your school community, this may not be the communication strategy for your school now. And even if you do decide to use email and a Web site to communicate, make sure that every important communication sent out electronically is also conveyed in print or in some other way, so that you reach families who do not have access to the technology.

Telephone "call in" services. Telephone answering systems now exist that allow teachers to record homework assignments and other messages. Parents can also leave messages for the teacher. In large districts, a "homework hotline" staffed by teachers permits students and parents to have their individual issues addressed.

To set up such a system, it is essential that you work with your telephone service provider. These systems usually require that there be a phone extension for each classroom. Each staff person would be responsible for recording daily messages. Family members and students could access messages by selecting the staff extension. Most systems allow for callers to leave a short message as well.

A note of caution: If you are working in a school that has a high percentage of limited-English speakers, keep in mind that they might do much better when there is a person, rather than a recording, answering the phone.

Putting It All Together: Developing an Effective Family-School Communication System

An effective, successful communication system begins with a review of current communication vehicles and with understanding the messages they send—intentionally or unintentionally—to families. Use or adapt the form on page 45 to look at your communication vehicles. Some samples are listed, but feel free to add others that apply to your school situation.

As principal, you may have your own set of answers for these questions. It is advisable to ask the school staff and the parent-teacher organization to provide answers from their perspective as well. Once you've compiled a set of answers for these questions, review them and designate those where obvious gaps exist. Start with one or two of the most urgent areas. Develop a set of strategies designed to meet the need. A small committee composed of parents and staff can best do this.

Once your staff has decided upon a set of strategies to try, it will be up to you as the principal to ensure implementation. Spend some time thinking of how to motivate staff and families to try these strategies. Be willing to consider both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators.

Assessing Our School's Family-School Communication System			
Communication Vehicle	**Its purpose and intended message**	**Frequency**	**Opportunity for feedback—How easy is it for the audience to respond to the communication?**
FROM SCHOOL TO HOME			
Newsletter			
Regularly scheduled conferences			
Progress reports			
Automated calls regarding attendance or other issues.			
Parent handbooks			
School article in local paper			
Home visits			
Email or Web site			
FROM HOME TO SCHOOL			
Scheduled telephone time			
Specially requested conferences			
Email			
Telephone call-in number			
Parent surveys			

Be sure to provide the information needed to undertake the strategies and offer teachers a chance to master any needed skills. Remember that working with parents probably was not part of their pre-service education, and teachers especially want to be perceived as competent.

Look at how the school's organization can support these new actions. Are there any policies or procedures that need to be adopted? Finally, define success and develop a timetable for reviewing progress, keeping what works, altering or eliminating ineffectual strategies, and integrating new and useful knowledge into the development of additional strategies.

Topics of Concern to Parents

The preceding discussion of *how* to communicate with families would be incomplete without some mention of *what* kinds of information families need to get from the school. The parent survey you conducted will have given you some guidance as to the questions of most interest to parents in your particular school. Nationwide, two topics that parents consistently identify as their top concerns are: 1) testing and test scores; and 2) homework and other ways to help their child at home. We'll deal with each of these topics briefly here.

What do our school's and my child's test scores mean? While schools have always given students tests, the recent emphasis on standards and accountability has resulted in many states placing greater emphasis on standardized tests. In fact, 27 states tie test scores to other factors such as promotion, graduation, or school funding (Lord 2000). And more are sure to follow.

As a result, many parents experience anxiety and confusion around the entire issue of testing. Recent polls conducted by Harris Interactive and Sylvan Learning Centers (Moore 2000) indicate that parents do not view test scores as true and valid measurements of their child's ability. Many parents reported that grades, schoolwork, social skills, and creativity were other factors to be considered as measures of ability.

Parents particularly oppose using test scores as the sole determinants for promotion and graduation (Luntz and Laslo 2000). Parents want struggling students to receive help and additional opportunities to catch up. And over half feel that other important educational areas are being neglected because of the emphasis on tests.

Yet, parents' feelings about testing are not entirely negative. One poll, by the publishers of tests, reports that more than 60 percent of parents see benefits in standardized tests (Olsen 2000). These include: learning how their children are doing, identifying areas where their children need help, and finding out how their children compare to others in the school and nation.

This is why it's vital for schools to explain their testing procedures and policies to parents. Furthermore, helping parents understand testing and test scores can go far toward establishing an atmosphere where parents are active partners in their children's learning. Tests can provide important feedback about a youngster's competencies to parents as well as teachers. For example, armed with information such as "your child is able to read words but is less able to understand the meaning," parents could encourage their child to summarize main ideas in stories read at home.

Surveys seem to show overwhelmingly that testing is one of the areas of their children's schooling where parents want to be more involved. Roeber (1995) suggests that schools combine individual parent/teacher conferences with an individual report sent to the home, parent group meetings, and a parent newsletter. Such a comprehensive approach provides occasions to talk about testing as it has an impact on the individual child and the school's educational program.

As with other areas of communication, teachers are a vital link in explaining testing and test scores to parents. It is important to provide training for teachers to ensure that they know how to explain:

- the meaning of percentiles;
- the purpose of specific tests;
- descriptions of each test the school uses;
- the accuracy of test scores;
- an explanation of why some students earn low test scores and high grades and others earn high scores and low grades;
- the difference between aptitude and achievement; and
- what parents can do to help their children improve test scores (Carpenter 1983; Educational Research Service 1999a).

How can I help my child at home? There is no denying that parents can and should be their children's most effective teachers. Involving parents as educators at home with their children is one of the most productive ways to improve students' attitudes toward learning, school, and their own achievement. This form of parent involvement does not require that parents come to the school, which makes it better for many parents.

However, almost all parents need information about specific ways to support learning in the home. It's up to you and your staff to help them get that information. The combined efforts of the principal and individual teachers are needed to make this happen. The most obvious place to start is keeping parents informed about their own children and how they are doing in school.

Parents also can play a productive role as homework monitors. If homework is important in your school, you should make sure that parents know this. You should enlist their help in making sure students know homework is important, too—that it gets done with care and on time. To this end, ask your teachers to create guidelines that will help parents monitor and supervise their children's homework.

In addition to providing guidelines for supervising homework, teachers can send home recommended reading lists and suggest home-based activities or trips parents might take their children on that relate to and supplement things being studied in class. Families are more likely to reinforce and extend classroom instruction at home when teachers give high-quality homework assignments, provide home learning ideas and materials, and guide the family in how to help.

Appendix B contains a number of handouts on helping children learn at home, which can be copied and distributed to families. They can also be incorporated in the school's newsletter and posted on the school's Web site. At a parent meeting, they can form the basis of a lively discussion. For example, parents can be asked to discuss which of these suggestions is easiest to follow, hardest to do, or might have the greatest impact.

Summary: Communication Is Key

Clear and open communication is a vital component of your efforts to make families feel welcome and involved in the school. As you look at your schoolwide communication system, remember that the goal is to develop a variety of communication vehicles that are respectful, diverse, frequent, thoughtful, and two-way.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas:

Establishing a School Climate that Says, "Families Are Welcome Here"

Regardless of which family involvement activities your school undertakes, the most important component for success is attitude. The staff in schools where parents are actively involved hold the attitude that families are vital partners in the education of their own children and the education of all children. These schools project a climate that says "we want to work with families" rather than "we're obliged to work with families" (Christenson undated).

Creating Positive First Impressions

In addition to attitude, Davies (2000) writes that the physical environment conveys a powerful message about how welcome parents are. Schools that are friendly and welcoming to family members have an easier time creating successful partnership programs.

Try to look at your school through the eyes of a parent visiting for the first time. In these days of heightened security, is the main (and often only open) entrance clearly marked? What is the first thing visitors see as they enter the building? Is it an attractive sign welcoming them to the school, or a warning sign demanding that they report to the office? Is it obvious how to get to the office? Once in the office, are visitors greeted enthusiastically, or left to stand around?

What do the hallways and classrooms say about how much those in charge of the school value the children and education? Is the atmosphere warm and inviting, or formal and intimidating?

Chambers (1998) developed the checklist on pages 51-52, which you can use to assess the first impression your school makes.

Checklist for a Welcoming First Impression of Your School

Environment—Outside

- ☐ Are the grounds attractively landscaped?
- ☐ Are the grounds clean and well maintained?
- ☐ Is there adequate visitor parking?
- ☐ Is there easy access from visitor parking to the main entrance?

Environment—Entrance

- ☐ Is the main entry clearly marked?
- ☐ Do entry signs welcome visitors and give directions to the office?
- ☐ Does the main entrance set a good tone for the school?
- ☐ Does it feel warm and welcoming (well-lit, with bright colors)?
- ☐ Is it clean and in good repair?
- ☐ Does it highlight student, teacher, and school accomplishments (pictures, rewards, student projects, artwork)?
- ☐ Does it provide a positive image of the school?
- ☐ Is it free of unpleasant noises or unfriendly written rules or directions?

Interior

- ☐ Are halls and rooms clean, well decorated, and in good repair?
- ☐ Are rooms and common areas such as the library clearly marked?
- ☐ Are students' work and accomplishments highlighted on the walls or in display cases?
- ☐ Is the lighting bright and the temperature comfortable?
- ☐ Are announcements and bell systems set at a comfortable decibel level?

Main Office

- ☐ Can the sign for the main office be clearly seen from a distance and from all approaches?
- ☐ Can office personnel easily see visitors when they enter?
- ☐ Is the decor of the office inviting (cheerful colors, good lighting, clean, neat, and in good repair)?
- ☐ Are the desks and other areas in view of the visitors kept organized and clean?
- ☐ Is there a nameplate identifying the person responsible for greeting visitors?
- ☐ Do office personnel greet visitors within a few seconds of their entry, letting them know they'll be right with them if they can't help them immediately?
- ☐ Are all office personnel welcoming and helpful (smiling, offering to escort visitors when necessary)?

(continued)

Checklist for a Welcoming First Impression of Your School (cont.)

- ☐ Is there a comfortable place for visitors to sit while waiting for appointments?
- ☐ Is the noise level comfortable and the area free from unpleasant odors?
- ☐ Do office staff avoid personal conversations in public areas?

Telephone Etiquette

- ☐ Are all employees informed about proper etiquette for answering calls and taking messages?
- ☐ Do they answer by immediately identifying the school or department and themselves?
- ☐ Do they answer in a pleasant tone of voice, making callers feel they are happy to be of assistance?
- ☐ Are they helpful to callers? When unable to answer a question, do they try to find the answer themselves to avoid routing the call to another person?

Automated Answering Services and Voice Mail

- ☐ Is the automated answering service easy to understand and follow, giving the caller an option to speak to a person if desired?
- ☐ Does it give office hours and let callers know when the school is not in session?
- ☐ Does the automated service provide callers with directions to the school?

Source: "How Customer-Friendly Is Your School?," *Educational Leadership*, L. Chambers, 1998.

Helping Teachers and Other Staff Form Relationships with Parents

Even more important than the school's physical and social environment is how staff relate to parents. Ensuring that staff believe parents are partners and, most of all, behave that way is the key to productive parent involvement. Office staff, security personnel, and even teachers sometimes approach parents as intruders who must justify their presence in the school.

And first impressions are hard to change. It is important that the message from everyone is "parents are welcome here!" Include office staff, custodians, lunchroom personnel, and other non-teaching staff in any training you do on communicating and working with parents.

Canter and Canter (1991) found that school staff who have been successful at engaging family members share four qualities:

- ☐ They know they must have the support of parents.
- ☐ In every interaction, they demonstrate their concern for the child.

Some Ways to Create a Family-Friendly School		
Easy to Do	**Takes a Little Work**	**Takes More Effort**
Post a welcome sign in all the languages spoken by families of children in the school.	Have a map of the school prominently displayed with the office, library, cafeteria, gym, counselor's office, and nurse's room clearly marked	Offer translation services at all meetings. Prepare written materials in the home language of the family.
Send home a monthly calendar of school events.	Offer school tours at least twice a year.	Establish a parent room in the building.
Have a secure coat rack and place for parents to leave their belongings while at the school.	Train the office secretary in how to welcome and greet parents.	Employ a school staff that reflects the ethnic and social backgrounds of the community.
Have examples of student work prominently displayed.	Set aside early morning office hours for the principal to have a "Second Cup of Coffee" with parents.	Put in place an effective and up-to-date referral process so that teachers can provide human services information to families in need.
Have special "parent visitor" badges.	Host a monthly parent/student luncheon with administration.	
	Establish a telephone tree to get information out to parents quickly.	
	Allow neighborhood groups to use the school building for meetings	
	Establish an open door policy.	

- They always treat parents the way they would like to be treated.
- They always demonstrate professionalism and confidence.

To get your staff to the point where they have these qualities may take some time as well as coaching and professional development. Working with parents requires a different set of skills than working with students, and few teacher pre-service programs include any formal courses on family involvement. Only 22 states allude to family involvement in their teacher certification requirements, and five of these refer to it only for the early childhood certificate (Shartrand et al. 1997). Not all teachers are comfortable having parents in their classroom or working with family members on an activity or project. This may be especially true for your non-teaching staff.

You may want to consider devoting one or more inservice days to developing a plan for family involvement and working on communication skills. This will advance the comfort level of teachers and other staff members about adopting the needed skills and routines for effective parent involvement. Training sessions can be developed around the following topics:

- research findings that illustrate the benefits of family involvement, including successful practices and strategies to overcome challenges;
- insights and skills needed to work with a variety of family structures and cultural backgrounds;
- assessing the school environment and implementing changes to make it more welcoming to family members;
- communication skills that encourage sharing with and listening to family members (Massachusetts Department of Education 2000).

Letting Parent Volunteers Know Their Efforts Are Appreciated

Of course, a vital part of making families feel welcome is to acknowledge the efforts of those who do get involved. Parents who put in the time and effort to volunteer in their children's school should be thanked in many formal and informal ways. Some ways to thank parents and underscore the value you place on their contributions include:

- notes of appreciation from the principal (see the sample in Appendix A);
- a phone call from a teacher;
- a volunteer recognition breakfast;
- an article in the school newsletter about a volunteer who has donated 100 hours to the school;

- certificates of appreciation (see the sample on Appendix A);
- gift certificates for a restaurant meal, a manicure, sporting events, etc. (can often be donated by local merchants);
- a volunteer wall in the school entry with pictures of parent volunteers;
- t-shirts with the logo " I help out at _____school."

Parent Centers

Another effective way of making parents welcome at the school is to designate a room in the building as a parent center. This is a place where parents could meet, have discussion groups, and work on school projects. The room can be furnished with tables and chairs or a donated sofa. It's a good idea to have a coffee pot, hot plate, and refrigerator. The parent center can be stocked with information about the school, parenting tips, and community resources. Some have lending libraries, videos to borrow, and a toy corner for younger children who accompany parents to the school.

Family centers can be used not only to strengthen the connection between home and school, but also to link families to other community resources. For example, the center may display information about:

- social service agencies;
- daycare and childcare providers;
- health services;
- training and employment oportunities;
- summer activities for children;
- after-school programs;
- cultural and other local events;
- college information; and
- tutoring and other educational services (Johnson 1996).

A telephone in the center will make it easy for parents to contact each other, call businesses for donations, and make arrangements for school events. In low-income neighborhoods, parents without telephone service can come to the parent center to contact utility companies, make doctor appointments, and telephone prospective employers. A parent liaison or volunteers can staff the parent center.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas:

Conclusion

Harriette Herman, in a thought-provoking article called "Parent Involvement: It's Politically Correct, But Is It Worth the Trouble?" (1995), notes that although everyone knows the benefits of parent involvement and endorses it, very few education leaders ask the question posed in the title.

As we've noted several times throughout this guide, before any school undertakes efforts to improve family involvement, it is vital that administrators and teachers consider how important family involvement is to the success of their school. As the school leader, you must take the initiative in addressing this question. Ask yourself, do you believe that high student achievement in your school depends on making sure that the school has a positive, productive, and mutually supportive relationship with families? Answer this honestly before you launch your family involvement plan.

You need to be aware—and make your staff aware—that building a strong family involvement program in your school is not a quick, easy task. Serious undertakings such as this take considerable time and effort.

Positive leadership is necessary for a school to establish a partnership relationship with families. It is the principal who must set the tone and encourage staff to try new ways of working with parents. In addition to modeling an enthusiastic attitude toward family participation, the principal needs to make family involvement a priority by providing staff with time, resources, and training.

Finally, it is vital that your school's family involvement efforts be directed toward the ultimate goal of improving student achievement. If you design your family involvement program with this goal as the keystone, inclusion of all families will be the natural consequence. As Herman writes, "No one knows better than principals and teachers that students' home life cannot be separated from their school achievements. The inextricable link of children with their families mandates that parental involvement in education be a critical priority in all schools" (1995, 15).

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas:

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Appendix A: Letters and Forms

1. Parent Survey, Family Involvement (Spanish-Language Version, with Sample Cover Letter)
2. Sample Format, Weekly School Newsletter
3. Sample Beginning-of-the-Year Letter, Principal to Parents
4. Sample Beginning-of-the-Year Letter, Teacher to Parents
5. Sample Calendar Page
6. Sample "Script" for Phone Call to Parent: "Bad News" Situations
7. Sample "Script" for Phone Call to Parent: "Good News" Situations
8. Sample Note of Appreciation from Principal for Volunteer Recognition
9. Sample Certificate of Appreciation for Volunteer Recognition

Cover Letter for Parent Survey, Family Involvement (Spanish-Language Version)

Estimados padres o guardianes:

La familia juega un papel muy importante en el éxito académico de los niños. Existen varias maneras en las cuales Usted puede involucrarse y apoyar el aprendizaje de su hijo(a). Ya sea asistiendo a juntas de padres y maestros (PTA), sirviendo como voluntario en el salón de clases de su hijo(a), ayudando con la feria de libros, o simplemente con leerle a su hijo(a) cada noche, Usted esta haciendo una gran contribución que le ayudará a su hijo(a) a sobresalir en la escuela.

La contribución familiar en el desarrollo académico de los hijos es fuerte aquí en (*nombre de la escuela*), pero aún siendo así, nos gustaría hacerla todavía mejor y asegurar que nuestro programa cumpla con las necesidades tanto de los padres como de los estudiantes y profesores. Usted puede ayudarnos a formar una mejor alianza entre la escuela y el hogar al contestar a las preguntas del siguiente cuestionario.

Por favor conteste y regrese el cuestionario al profesor o profesora de su hijo(a), o depositelo en la caja situada en la oficina principal de la escuela antes del primero de octubre.

Si Usted tiene alguna pregunta sobre el cuestionario o sobre las actuales oportunidades de apoyo familiar en la escuela, por favor no espere para contactarnos. Mi número es (*nombre y numero*), y la hora más conveniente para localizarme es (*mejor hora para localizar*). Siempre me es grato el hablar con Usted.

Atentamente,

Cuestionario para Padres de Familia, Participacion Familia

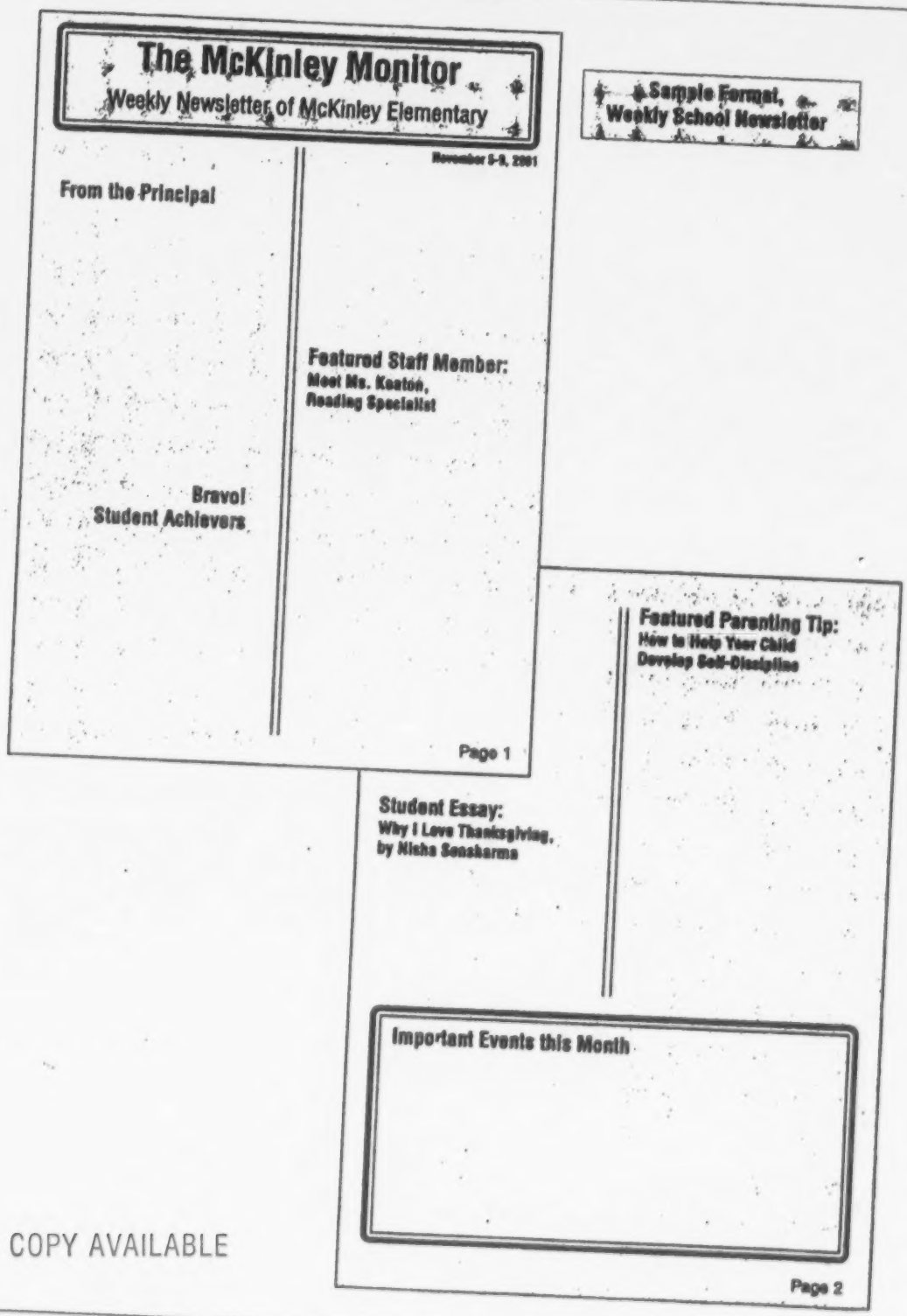
Estimados padres de familia o guardianes:

Nuestra escuela está en proceso de fortalecer nuestro programa de participación familiar.

Los profesores han identificado varias maneras por las cuales yo puedo participar en la educación de mi hijo. De ellos, estoy dispuesto a:	INDIQUEN TRES: ■ Comunicar con otros padres de familia acerca de actividades próximas ■ Participar como voluntario en el salón de clase ■ Ayudar con excursiones o actividades especiales ■ Ayudar en la oficina, en el comedor, o en el patio de recreo ■ Ayudar con la recaudación de fondos ■ Servir en un comité de la escuela ■ Llevar a cabo juntas de padres de familia en mi casa ■ Trabajar en la comunidad para el apoyo de la escuela ■ Proveer ayuda en general cuando se necesite ■ Otro (Favor de especificar): _____
Me gustaría saber mas de los siguientes tópicos:	INDIQUE LOS TRES QUE SON SUS OPCIONES DE MAS IMPORTANCIA: ■ ¿Cuales son los estándares de aprendizaje en mi escuela? ■ ¿Cuales son los exámenes estatales y como puedo saber los resultados de mi hijo? ■ ¿Cuales son los estándares de comportamiento en la escuela de mi hijo? ■ ¿Cómo puedo conseguir información practica acerca de la crianza de mi hijo? ■ ¿Estamos seguros que mis hijos encuentren seguros in la escuela? ¿En la ida y regreso de la escuela? ■ ¿Cómo puedo ayudar a mi hijo con sus tareas de la escuela? ■ ¿Que hace la escuela con respecto a problemas sociales? (pandillas, comportamientos violentos, etc.) ■ ¿Hay problemas con drogas, tabaco, y alcohol en nuestra escuela? ■ ¿Hay problemas de pandillas? ■ ¿Cómo puedo ayudar a que mi hijo sobresalga en la escuela? Otras sugerencias: _____ _____

Cuestionario para Padres de Familia, Participacion Familia (Continuado)

Prefiero que me contacten por:	❑ Teléfono ❑ Correo electrónico ❑ Correo ❑ Correspondencia llevada por mi hijo	
La mejor hora para contactarme es:	❑ Por la mañana ❑ Por la tarde ❑ Por la noche ❑ Durante las fines de semana	
Estoy disponible para ayudar:	❑ Durante los días escolares (¿Cuales días?) ❑ Durante la tarde ❑ Temprano en la mañana antes de que comiencen las clases ❑ Los fines de semanas ❑ No puedo venir a la escuela, pero estoy dispuesto a ayudar desde mi casa. ❑ No importa la hora, si me avisan con anticipación.	
Para que yo pueda asistir a los eventos en la escuela requiero de:	Cuidado de niños: ❑ Sí ❑ No Transportación: ❑ Sí ❑ No Otros requerimientos especiales: ❑ Servicio de traducción ❑ Intérprete de sordomudos ❑ Otro_____	
El idioma hablado en nuestro hogar es:	❑ Inglés ❑ Español ❑ Otro_____	
	Madres (o guardiana)	Padre (o guardián)
Nombre		
Dirección		
Código Postal		
Teléfono	casa: tabajo:	casa: tabajo:
Correo electrónico		
Nombres y grados escolares de hijos		
Otras preguntas o preocupaciones		
¡Gracias por su ayuda!		



Sample Format,
Weekly School Newsletter

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Sample Beginning-of-the-Year Letter, Principal to Parents

Dear Parents:

As the new school year begins, I want to welcome you and your child to *(school name)*. We anticipate an exciting year of learning.

You are a vital partner in your child's academic growth. During the next few weeks, you will receive information about how you can get involved in school activities.

There are many ways for you to participate—by coming to PTA meetings, volunteering in your child's class, or just by supporting your child's learning at home. We know that each family's schedule and home commitments are different, and we value and appreciate whatever kinds of involvement you choose.

If you have questions or concerns at any time during the year, please feel free to contact me. My office phone number is *(number)*, and I will also be glad to set up an appointment to talk with you in person during the day. I've also set aside evening hours for meetings with parents on Mondays and Tuesdays from 6:00-8:00.

At *(school)*, staff, students, and families are a community of learners. The staff and I look forward to working in partnership with you and your child during the coming year.

Sincerely,

Sample Beginning-of-the-Year Letter, Teacher to Parents

Dear *(parents' names)*:

On behalf of (*school name*), I look forward to working with *(child's name)* this year. *(Grade level)* is an exciting year. Among the many things we will be studying, I find that *(list two or three topic areas)* are the favorites of students.

This year you can expect that your child will have *(fill in amount)* of homework each evening. Please let me know if your child has difficulty completing the assigned homework.

I occasionally need help with the following: *(list areas where assistance is wanted)*. If you'd like to help in any of these areas, please let me know.

If you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to contact me. The best way to get in touch with me is *(list preferred method of contact and best times)*.

I look forward to a stimulating year of learning for *(name of child)* and his/her classmates.

Sincerely,

P. S. Enclosed is a set of the rules for my classroom. Please go over them with your child.

School Name
Address
Phone

April 2002

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3 Early Release, 1:20 Passover, Concluding Days	4	5 Fourth Quarter Report Cards	6
7 Daylight Saving Time Begins	8	9 PTA Meeting, Volunteer Recognition 7:00	10 Early Release, 1:20	11	12 Spring Sock Hop 7:30	13
14	15 3rd-Grade Standards of Learning Testing	16	17 Early Release, 1:20	18	19 Spring Awards Assembly	20
21	22	23	24 Early Release, 1:20	25	26 National Arbor Day	27
28	29	30	Early Release, 1:20			

Sample "Script" for Phone Call to Parent: "Bad News" Situations

NOTE: This "script" is most appropriate if you're calling a parent with "bad news." An example for "good news" situations is included on the next page. Either can be adapted for situations neither good nor bad *(we found your son's glasses in the cafeteria)*. For good or neutral news situations, there's no need to set up a phone appointment.

[If at all possible, it's best to try to come to a preliminary agreement with the parent on a specific time to place this call. You can try to do this through the child, or call just to set up a convenient time.]

Hello, this is _____, your son's/daughter's principal. How are you?
If you remember, we agreed that I'd call you at this time. Is it still convenient?

[Or if you have not set up a phone appointment, *"I hope I'm not calling at an inconvenient time."*]

[Pause here to give the parent a chance to say yes or no. If it is inconvenient, ask for a convenient alternative and call back then. This also might be a good point to ask whether the parent speaks English adequately to have this conversation with you, or whether they need someone to translate.]

I'd like to discuss _____ with you briefly. I promise I won't take more than 15 minutes of your time.

[Be sure to only take 15 minutes. Quickly focus on the topic at hand. Make the points you need to make right away without too much elaboration and stick to the facts as simply stated as possible. It's best to make them all before engaging in any discussion with the parent, particularly if what you're calling about is "bad news." However, if the parent really wants to discuss point-by-point, let him or her do it; you need to control the discussion, but not at the expense of courtesy or good parent/school relations.]

I hope I've been clear. Is there anything you don't understand or that you'd like me to explain further?

[Let the parent say what they are going to say completely before you respond (if there is a response to be made). You don't want to get into a point-by-point debate.]

I understand; let's talk about how we can handle the situation.

[Make sure you listen carefully. A parent usually is your best source for good options about what to do. However, sometimes parents' suggestions are either impractical or would involve something you can't or don't want to do—corporal punishment, for example.]

Thank you for your advice and cooperation. I'm sure between school and home we can make sure this situation is resolved and we both can get _____ back on track doing well in school. Good-bye.

Sample "Script" for Phone Call to Parent: "Good News" Situations

NOTE: This "script" is intended for "good news" situations. It can be adapted for situations neither good nor bad *(we found your son's glasses in the cafeteria)*. For good news or neutral news situations, there's no need to set up a phone appointment.

Hello, this is _____, your son's/daughter's principal. How are you? I hope I'm not calling at an inconvenient time, but I have some good news for you.

[This might be a good point to ask whether the parent speaks English adequately to understand the good news, or whether they need someone to translate.]

I'd like to tell you that _____ has _____.

[Describe good news here (e.g., been chosen to represent the school in the regional spelling bee; received good enough grades to be on the honor roll; etc.).]

[Elaborate, explaining what happened in more depth, how it happened, why it happened, and why the school is proud and the parent should be proud. Also leave some time for the parent to express his or her pride.]

I hope I've been clear how proud we are of _____ and why you should be proud too. Is there anything you don't understand or that I can explain further for you?

Thank you for your time. I hope you tell your son/daughter how proud you are. He/she is doing very well, and we have your cooperation and support as well as his/her efforts to thank. We're lucky to have families like yours as part of our school community.

Good-bye.

Sample Note of Appreciation from Principal for Volunteer Recognition

Dear :

On behalf of the students and staff of *(name of school)*, I want to thank you for volunteering so generously during the past school year.

I know that your time is valuable, and your willingness to contribute some of that valuable time to *(name of school)* shows your commitment to the well-being of your child and all of our students. The contributions you have made by *(description of volunteer activities; for example, helping out in Ms. Bates' classroom, helping coordinate the book sale and spring plant sale; tutoring in the after-school program)* have really made a difference in our students' educational experience this year.

As you know, students, staff, and parents here at *(name of school)* enjoy a warm, caring community that fosters the highest standards of academic, social, and emotional growth. The efforts of volunteers like you are a vital part of that community.

Thank you again, and I look forward to continuing to work with you in the future.

Sincerely,

McKinley Elementary School

Great Performers Award

to

_____

in appreciation for
outstanding volunteer service

_____ _____

Joan Phillips, Principal Date

Sample Certificate of Appreciation for Volunteer Recognition

Appendix B: Reproducible Materials

1. How Teachers Can Make the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences
2. How Parents Can Make the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences
3. Teachers: Do's and Don'ts for Home Visits
4. Parent Handouts:
   - How Can I Tell How My Child Is Doing in School?
   - Riley's Seven Good Practices for Families
   - Ten Tips for Parents: Get Involved in Your Child's School
   - Checklist for Helping Your Child with Homework

How Teachers Can Make the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences

Before the Conference:

- Review your records and jot down the key points you want to share.
- Remember that the conference is a time to gather information, as well as give it. List the questions you have for the parent.
- Make sure that you have a quiet, private space to hold the conference.

During the Conference:

- Begin on time.
- Begin and end on a positive note.
- Use both the parent's and the child's name.
- Remember to invite the parent to talk about his or her concerns and insights about the child's needs. *Listen,* and repeat (paraphrase) what the parent has said.
- If you have problems to share, be prepared to offer one or two possible solutions. Ask the parent for his or her solutions as well.
- Summarize the agreed-on plan of action.
- Before ending, check that the parent has understood what you have said. A good way to summarize the conference is to say, "We're almost at the end of our time and I want to be sure that I've been clear. Tell me please what you've learned about your child's progress in school."

After the Conference:

- Make a note of anything you promised to follow up on. And make sure you do follow up.
- If the parent will be working on some things with the child, contact them in two or three weeks to see how things are going and report any changes.

How Parents Can Make the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences

Before the Conference:

- Talk with your child. Find out what your child sees as his or her best and worst subjects. Ask your child if there is anything he or she wants you to discuss with the teacher.
- Jot down a few notes about what you want to talk about, especially any concerns you have.

During the Conference:

- Arrive on time.
- Ask your most important questions first—time is often limited. Some good questions to ask include:

  What are my child's areas of strength and weakness?

  Is my child working up to his or her ability?

  How well does my child get along with others?
- Ask the teacher for specific suggestions on how you can help your child do better.

After the Conference:

- Discuss the conference with your child.
- Follow through on suggestions agreed upon at the conference.
- Follow up with the teacher to see that needed improvements are occurring.

Teachers: Do's and Don'ts for Home Visits

Do define a goal for your visit—to say a friendly hello, get acquainted, leave information, discuss a problem, or a combination of these.

Do listen carefully, no matter what else is on your agenda. Ask whether there are any questions.

Do try to bring a translator of you can't speak the family's language, but **don't** abandon the idea of a visit because a translator is unavailable.

Do consider alerting the family to your visit—by telephone, note home, or postcard. **Don't** limit yourself, however, to prearranged visits only.

Do bring a token of the school or a talking point—a book to share, information about the school, a picture of your own family.

Do set a reasonable length of time for the visit. Twenty minutes or less can be adequate, but some visits run an hour if you let them.

Do plan for at least some late-afternoon or evening visits.

Don't pay much attention to the physical surroundings.

Don't require parents or guardians to read or fill out anything in your presence. (Their literacy may be poor.)

Don't go alone if you are hesitant about your safety or ability to surmount cultural barriers.

Don't take offense if a family is not home for an appointment. Try to renew the appointment.

Source: "Do's and Don't for Home Visits," *Education Week*, 1997. Online: www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=01visis1.h17& keywords=Home%.

How Can I Tell How My Child Is Doing in School?

- ❒ Ask your child to show you his or her schoolwork, and note the grades and comments by the teacher.
- ❒ Check report cards carefully for grades in each subject, attendance, and conduct. Ask the teacher or school counselor for other kinds of information about your child's performance such as test scores and teacher observations.
- ❒ Attend your school's regular parent-teacher conferences and bring any questions or concerns. Ask for a special meeting if necessary. Regular phone calls and notes are also a good way to increase the information shared between teachers and parents.
- ❒ Use homework hotlines and other dial-in services to get information about school activities or to ask questions.
- ❒ Ask to see examples of successful work and compare it to your child's work. Listen to the teacher's comments on the work, and find out what your child needs to do to improve. Plan with the teacher how you both can work together to help your child learn more.
- ❒ If you see a serious problem, ask the teacher to report on your child's progress by a note or phone call each week during the next grading period.
- ❒ Don't criticize your child's teacher in front of the child. This makes children less responsible for their behavior.

Source: *Questions Parents Ask about School*, U.S. Department of Education. Online: www.ed.gov/Family/agbts/Questions/.

Riley's Seven Good Practices for Families

1. Take the time. Those moments talking at evening meals and visiting the library, museum, or zoo make a difference.

2. Read together. It's the starting point of all learning. Read with your youngsters. Share a good book with your teen.

3. Use TV wisely. Limit viewing to no more than 2 hours a school day.

4. Stay in regular contact with your child's teacher. Encourage your child to take challenging courses at school. Check homework every day.

5. Join with your child's teachers and principal to compare your school program against high standards of excellence so your children can reach their full potential.

6. Know where your children are, especially your teens. Encourage them to join youth groups. Support community efforts to keep children safe and off the streets after hours.

7. Talk directly to your children about the values you want them to have and about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. It could literally save their lives.

Source: *The Family Involvement Partnership for Learning*, Richard W. Riley, 1996.

Ten Tips for Parents: Get Involved in Your Child's School

1. Attend school events and activities.
2. Tutor students after school.
3. Encourage at least one other parent to become a school volunteer.
4. Volunteer at your child's school at least three times a year.
5. Offer to work as a teacher's aide in your child's classroom.
6. Ask the principal if your child's school has a school improvement plan.
7. Ask questions. Ask more questions.
8. Learn more about how the school is increasing student achievement.
9. Get involved in school meetings for parents and community members that focus on how to strengthen student learning.
10. Help school staff research new and proven learning methods.

Source: *What's Going On In My Child's School: A Parent's Guide to Good Schools*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000.

Checklist for Helping Your Child with Homework

Here are some ways you can help your child be successful in school:

Show that you think education and homework are important.

- ❒ Do you set a regular time every day for homework?
- ❒ Does your child have the papers, books, pencils, and other things needed to do assignments?
- ❒ Does your child have a fairly quiet place to study with lots of light?
- ❒ Do you set a good example by reading and writing yourself?
- ❒ Do you encourage your child to develop good study habits (e.g. scheduling enough time for assignments; making up practice tests)?

Monitor assignments.

- ❒ Do you make periodic checks with the teacher to see if homework assignments are missing?
- ❒ Do you know what your child's homework assignments are? How long they should take? How the teacher wants you to be involved?
- ❒ Do you see that assignments are started and completed?
- ❒ Do you read the teacher's comments on assignments that are returned?
- ❒ Do you make sure TV viewing does not cut into your child's homework time?
- ❒ Do you talk with your child about homework assignments? Does your child understand them?

Provide guidance.

- ❒ Do you understand and respect your child's style of learning?
- ❒ Does you child work better alone or with someone else?
- ❒ Does your child learn best when he can see things, hear things, or handle them?
- ❒ Do you help your child to get organized?
- ❒ Does your child need a calendar or assignment book? A bag for books and a folder for papers?
- ❒ Do you know where your branch library is located, and have you helped your child obtain a library card?

Talk with someone at school when problems come up.

- ❒ Do you meet the teacher early in the year before any problems arise?
- ❒ If a problem comes up, do you meet with the teacher?
- ❒ Do you cooperate with the teacher and your child to work out a plan and a schedule to solve homework problems?

Source: *A Guide to Homework Success*, Chicago Public Schools.

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